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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 13 October 2021

Infighting Reveals Fragmentation between the Transitional Council Forces in Aden

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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The city of Aden in southern Yemen has played host to sporadic cycles of violence for the past seven years, the latest of which saw violent clashes erupt in the Crater area in early October. The current confrontations are unique in that they took place between armed factions affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), indicating the existence of deep fragmentation within the Council, which receives support from the UAE and does not hide its separatist ambitions.

Background

Recent clashes are rooted in undeclared disputes between the military power centers of the STC, headed by Aidarous al-Zoubaidi, which began to emerge in early 2019, and then escalated gradually, as a result of Saudi Arabia joining the competition over influence in Aden. The UAE increased its influence following the events of August of the same year, during which the STC forces were able to defeat and expel the government forces from the city, with the support and backing of the Emirati military. Subsequently, the council began the process of redeploying its forces, but this did not prevent the emergence of tribal and regional rivalries within the council forces, whose loyalties are spread among three active southern regions in the transitional council: Ad Dali', Radfan, and Yafa.

In late 2019, the STC decided to remove Security Belt forces in Aden led by Imam al-Nubi (from Radfan), from their position in Camp 20 in the Crater area.¹ It was transferred to the Buriqa district, west of the governorate, a process that was met with so many challenges that the implementation of the decision was postponed until March 2020. After that, it was agreed that al-Nubi's forces would withdraw from Camp 20 to be replaced by the Asifa Brigade, led by Awssan Fadl Al Anshali (from Ad Dali'). However, contrary to the agreement, security forces affiliated with the Aden Security Department, led by Shallal Shaye'a (also from Ad Dali'), were retained to control the Ma'ashiq area; where the presidential palace is located.²

Recently however, al-Nubi has re-emerged as a commander in the Crater area, which includes a number of government and commercial institutions; most importantly the Central Bank. He now poses greater danger to his opponents, given the increase in the number of his fighters in Aden and access to various types of weapons, motorized vehicles and material support. It seems that Saudi Arabia and its ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed Al-Jaber, are backing him,³ which has caused concerns for other STC armed factions, with tensions rising in Crater to the point that armed confrontations erupted in early October.

¹ It was noted on the Southern Transitional Council's media that Imam al-Nubi appears with the title "Al-Silwi" in relation to the Al-Silw area in Taiz governorate, evidencing that his origins go back to the geography of the north, and there are those who say that he is a brother on the mother's side of Mukhtar Al-Nubi, commander of the Fifth Brigade, and that he gained the title during the intervention of the Arab coalition, which began its operations in Yemen in 2015.

² "A 'Transitional' Military Commander Says He Handed over Camp 20 and Government Institutions in Crater, including Banks, to Other Forces," Al-Masdar Online, 24/3/2020, accessed on 4/10/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3A7BT7H>.

³ This was pointed out by the Southern Transitional Council affiliated journalist, Salah Al-Saqladi, during the program "Zwaya Al-Hadath" on Belqees TV on 2/10/2021.



One of the direct causes of the confrontations that unleashed the stifled tensions between the STC factions was that al-Nubi's forces stormed the Crater police station and released a detainee imprisoned against the backdrop of the popular protests that took place in Aden two weeks before the confrontations. However, there are those who also link the incident and the intervention of other parties to the confrontation with the illegal acquisition of both state and private, lands and property — common among most of the leaders of the armed factions affiliated with the Council. This represented the source of many clashes that were widespread in the governorates of Aden and Lahj.

To alleviate the impression about the severity its divisions, the STC issued a statement that attributed these events to a political scheme to mark Aden as an unsafe city. This created justifications for most government ministers to remain abroad, obstructing the arrival of the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, in Aden, and igniting popular protests again to undo what he described as “the achievements of the south.”⁴ Although the statement did not state the party behind this scheme, it is concerned with the parties opposed to the STC within the government in which it has been participating since December 2020. This extends to Saudi Arabia, which is usually indicated by prominent members of the council as an obstacle to the aspirations of the south, based on calculations of its interests in Yemen.⁵

The outbreak of armed violence in Crater coincided with the return of the Prime Minister, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, to Aden, after he left for Riyadh, along with a number of ministers, in March 2021, as a result of the escalation of popular protests calling for a solution to the deteriorating economic, security and health conditions in Aden. The return of the prime minister also followed the end of similar protests calling for the same demands in the city of Mukalla in the Hadhramaut governorate, Aden, and Taiz, as well as with the resumption of international efforts to stop the war, after the appointment of Grundberg as a new envoy to Yemen, who arrived in Aden two days after the confrontations stopped. He met separately with the Prime Minister and the leadership of Aden Governorate, then the STC leadership.

The Parties Involved in the Aden Clashes

On one side of the recent confrontations in the Crater area was Imam al-Nubi, along with dozens of armed men, including Adenite youth and others who formed armed groups to resist the advance of the Houthis, and their ally, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, since the attempt to invade Aden in 2015. Two of the brothers of Imam al-Nubi, Awwad and Ali, joined the battle with armed reinforcements, while the position of his most prominent brother, Mukhtar, who commands the 5th Brigade, was not clear.

⁴ “The Presidency Warns against Covering up the Fugitive Imam al-Silwi, and Calls on Citizens to Report any Information that Leads to his Arrest and Bringing to Justice.” Website of the Southern Transitional Council, 4/10/2021, accessed on 4/10/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3moa5Hd>.

⁵ The most prominent allusion to this was by Major General Ahmed Saeed bin Buraik, who is currently the President of the National Assembly (unelected parliament) in the STC, in televised and press interviews.

On the other side are the forces loyal to the Southern Transitional Council, most notably the Asifah Brigade, the Security Belt Forces, and the Counter-Terrorism Forces. Among the most prominent names present in them are the commander of the Asifah Brigade, Awssan Fadl Al Anshali, and the commander of the Security Belt in Aden, Jalal Al-Rubaie (Al-Yafi'i). The results of the asymmetric confrontation were in favour of the STC forces, who now possess important military capabilities, through which they were able to defeat the government forces loyal to President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, in the events of August 2019. Despite the concentration of Imam al-Nubi fighters stationed at the entrances to neighbourhoods and on the rooftops of residential buildings and in the mountains overlooking the Crater area, they gave up fairly quickly.

The confrontations resulted in deaths and injuries on both sides and among civilians. The identities of the victims reveal the dimensions of the confrontation, the nature of the STC forces' make up, and the regional, tribal, and family loyalties that control them. They also reveal the nature of the relationship and the power struggle between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Aden. The quick resolution of the confrontations indicates that the various parties have agreed to curb escalation of the conflict, as the Saudi forces stationed at the coalition headquarters in the Buraiqah district played a prominent role in this. The fate of Imam al-Nubi was not clear, despite rumors that he was transferred to the headquarters of the coalition via a Saudi armoured vehicle. It is expected that the recent clashes will result in a rearrangement of the STC forces to ensure the dominance of the most prominent side in the rivalry triangle within it (Ad Dhali'/Radfan/Yafa), represented by the Council President, Aidarous Al-Zubaidi.

Conclusion

The recent clashes in the city of Aden signify new tensions in the separatist southern bloc, with potential to lead to further violence. They demonstrate the diminishing chances for the STC secession project's success. The military structure of the council forces, as the recent clashes revealed, is not based on the unified force necessary to attain what advocates of secession call the "southern armed forces." The events in Crater in Aden stack up against earlier violent incidents, the most recent of which was the August 2019 confrontations, which caused deep divisions in southern Yemen. The latest Crater events paved the way for another, deeper split within the separatist factions. This means that rethinking the secessionist call has become a national necessity to protect and preserve the cohesion of southern Yemen no less important than the necessity of protecting the national unity of the entire country. It has also become clear that if any separation occurs, it will not stop at southern Yemen, but will continue with the fragmentation of the entire south.